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VOL. VIII. No. 14 JULY 6, 1911

THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

THE INADEQUACY OF "NATURAL" REALISM

A FEW years ago idealism in one form or another seemed to have definitely won the day in philosophy. But very recently the realistic heresy has sprung up again, and it is now rampant at Columbia, at Harvard, and at many another American university; it is even gaining ground in orthodox England. This contemporary movement, called by some of its leaders "natural" or "naïve" realism, is in large measure a reaction against the excesses of absolute idealism; the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. Realism calls a halt to the building of metaphysical air-castles, and bids us keep our feet on *terra firma*. To all who long to see philosophy forsake irresponsible speculation and cleave to a surer if slower procedure, it is a welcome change. But just what *terra firma* is, how we may most accurately describe it, in the large, is not an easy matter to settle. In the opinion of the writer of this paper "natural" realism gives us an inaccurate and inadequate account of the facts, and must be supplanted by a critical realism which shall be based on the insight which idealism has contributed to philosophy.

There are, as a matter of fact, several mutually incompatible theories in the field, each of which purports to represent the instinctive realism of the natural man. These theories are not always kept distinct, and the difficulties in the way of one theory are often met by an unconscious shift of base to a point of view which is really quite different. The particular type of "natural" realism here opposed may possibly, when the full light of day is let in upon it, find no champions. So much the better, then; we shall have got out of the way a theory which, even if not consistently held by any of our contemporary realists, figures largely in their writings and gives much of its plausibility to their position.

This particular type of realism, then, is that most "natural" of all realisms, the belief that the very data which we have in experience slip out of experience and continue to exist, with the same qualities, when no one's experience includes them. It would seem to be the

belief indicated by Professor Montague's contention, agreed to by the notable Six, "that things known may continue to exist unaltered when they are not known."[1] It is the belief that the "this" which the idealist calls "content of experience" is the very "object" which the physicist speaks of as "out there," as the cause of our experience. By a critical realism, on the other hand, is meant a realism which holds that the "this" of experience, the object perceived, is numerically and qualitatively different from, and exists later in time than, the thing-in-itself "out there" which causes the experience.

The critical realist has much in common with idealists of the stamp of Berkeley and Mill. Both idealist and critical realist believe that these data which they have and describe exist only as elements of this particular experience—whereas to the "natural" realist the data of experience are permanent existences, now in some one's experience, now in no one's. It is a further consideration which parts the critical realist from the idealist, the latter holding that the cosmos is merely a construct, that there are no "absent objects" save in the sense of "permanent possibilities of sensation," while the former believes in a cosmos which really exists, in the same sense in which this "now" of experience exists. The difference between the natural realist and the critical realist is, then, that the former's universe is made up of the very "thises" of human experience, eked out with other contiguous "thises"; whereas the latter's universe is made up of realities which are pictured (to some extent) by the "thises" of experience, but lie beyond them. To the former, a man's experience when he looks at the starry heavens really includes a large percentage of the cosmos; to the latter it is but a momentary phase of this particular human experience, which bears the same relation to the universe as the man's body, or brain, does to other physical things. To the natural realist there is just this world that we see and touch, with our individual experiences flitting about in it like search-lights, illuminating portions of it that preexisted. To the critical realist all the things-I-see-and-touch are but visual-and-tactile-experiences within my total experience; each total experience is a microcosm, surrounded by a sea of things-in-themselves which never come within human experience at all; the macrocosm is much bigger than the natural realist imagines, it includes the separate streams of consciousness, with their subjective and objective experiences, and in between them a world of ejective realities which those reduplicated objective experiences more or less fragmentarily picture.

It must be confessed that the *prima facie* plausibility is with the natural realist, and the label of his system therefore legitimate. Our

[1] "The Program and First Platform of Six Realists," this JOURNAL, Vol. VII., p. 396.

contemporary realists never tire of telling us that their view "is the natural, instinctive belief of all men,"[2] and frankly shift the burden of proof to the shoulders of the sophisticated critic who would deny the belief of the "natural man" whose heart is pure of metaphysics. Now some of us are strongly inclined to suspect that your "natural man" is hopelessly unanalytic, and that if philosophy has any useful function in the world it consists largely in correcting his notions and making distinctions where his vague and intermittent reflection has discovered none. Moreover, the "natural man" is an unreliable witness to put one's trust in; he has been made sponsor to not a few theories for which we may well doubt his willingness to be responsible. At the outset he gives his unguarded assent, but when close inspection reveals all that the theory implies he backs out. The writer's experience with such "natural men" as he has caught is that when the implications of "natural" realism are relentlessly unfolded, they reject it with horror. Whither will the natural realist turn, then, if his own witness bewrayeth him?

It is significant that reflection has never been long satisfied with "natural" realism. It is precisely the difficulties in this obvious view that have precipitated many philosophic struggles; there are grave reasons why we must pass on beyond the surface look of things if we wish to construct a world-picture compatible with all the facts. To the "natural man's" assertion that we have our world in common—which is the contention of the "natural" realist—we have to reply, How do you know that we do? And we can go on to say, There are cogent reasons for denying that we do, in the strict sense. We *live* in a common world, but each of us is shut off from the rest of the world by the wall that surrounds his own consciousness; our visual and tactile experiences are within that wall and only *represent* what is without. We do not, strictly, have any "this" in common. The reasons for making this denial we shall proceed to note.

I

When we examine our *data,* we find that what we have at any moment, what we then know at first hand to exist, is not a world, but a very limited *field.* We have, *e. g.,* one side of a room, a bodily pain, a wish, and a vague background of other elements; and we have these things *existing together.* Whatever else may exist beyond this little circle of reality is really beyond it, is shut off from it, does not exist in that relation of felt togetherness with these elements in which they exist with one another. It is, partly at least, because of this primary fact that the conception of consciousness has been framed. Consciousness is this little field of reality that is present here, in

[2] *Ibid.,* p. 398.

contrast with a bigger world believed in beyond it. Or, if you please, consciousness is this peculiar relation, that of *felt togetherness,* which exists between these few data here. Whatever may be beyond this little field does *not* exist in this relation to the elements within the field, and can be proved not to. For the relation is precisely that of being *felt* together; and if those other elements are not felt together with these, then they do not exist in that relation with these. Your wishes and bodily pains, *e. g.,* are not felt together with mine; they exist in a separate field. I may speak of knowing your mind, but I can only mean that I know more or less *about* what is in your mind. In a sense I may say I have the "same" feelings. But that must not blind us to the simple primal fact that those very feelings which *you* are having—your bodily pain, your wish—are not felt with, do not exist in this relation of felt togetherness with, my pains and wishes, as my pains and wishes do exist with the other simultaneous elements in my field. It may be said that the absence of perceiving a relation is not the same as perceiving the absence of a relation. But that objection ignores the peculiar nature of this relation, which is nothing but that of being *felt* together. It is not the perceiving of a relation, but the existence of the relation, that is in question.

Suppose, then, you and I both say, "I see this tree." I have a "this" within my field which I call "this tree." It exists in the relation of felt togetherness with all the other simultaneous elements in this field—with, for example, a wish of mine. You likewise have a "this" within your experience which you call "this tree"; it exists in the relation of felt togetherness with a bodily pain of yours. Now the "this tree" in my field does *not* exist in the relation of felt togetherness with that bodily pain—as it *does* exist in that relation with my wish. The difference here is ultimate and indisputable, can be verified by any simple act of introspection. And if it is granted, the theory of natural realism is definitely refuted, by the logical canon of identity. The "this tree" in the one field exists in the relation of felt togetherness with a certain bodily pain; the "this tree" in the other field does not exist in the relation of felt togetherness with that bodily pain. A "this tree" that is in a certain relation can not be a "this tree" that is *not* in that relation. Therefore they are not the same "this tree" element. The "this" of your experience can not be identical with the "this" of my experience; they are two experiences, similar no doubt, but numerically different, one in your field, in your experience, in your consciousness (as you prefer to put it), the other in mine. The two fields do not overlap and include common elements; the world is, as the idealist maintains, a world of separate microcosms.

The natural realist and the absolutist have much in common—sworn foes as they are. They take common cause here, and maintain that though *I* do not feel this "tree" element with the bodily pain, they nevertheless are felt together by you, or by the absolute. Leaving out the implications of personal pronouns and capitalized absolutes, this means that though a felt togetherness between these two elements doesn't exist here, it exists somewhere else. But that it doesn't exist here, as a part of the felt togetherness of this field, is what we are affirming. There exists here and now a felt togetherness that extends so far *and no farther. This* field of felt togetherness does *not* include that pain. There is no boundary anywhere within this field; what is anywhere within it is in the felt together relation with what is anywhere else within it. But there *is* a boundary *about* it, that shuts out that pain. If there were not, all the rest of your field would be felt together with my field—our two consciousnesses would coalesce, we should be for the time one person. What need, then, of laborious mind-reading or elusive telepathy? The fact of this wall, this psychological horizon, this boundary to a field, is a perfectly definite fact, not to be glossed over. Such a wall exists between "this tree" No. 1 and that pain; it does not exist between "this tree" No. 2 and that pain. Psychology has not been talking in meaningless terms in speaking of my sensation and yours. I have avoided this phraseology, which might be deemed partisan; but the facts stand out nevertheless. The world will not be squashed down so small as the natural realists wish; there remain my walled-in field and yours and everybody else's, which never overlap or intersect.

II

This truth comes out still more vividly from a consideration of the *qualitative* difference between my "this tree" experience and yours. Data which are qualitatively different can not be numerically identical; and no "this" in my experience can ever be exactly the same, qualitatively, as any "this" in your experience at the same moment, could not be unless our bodies were exactly alike and occupied the same place in space, *i. e.*, in idealistic terms, unless *every* element in our two experiences were identical; in which case we should be one and the same person.

My present "this tree" may be, for example, a small, indistinct bluish object, while yours may be simultaneously a large, distinct gray and green object. A small bluish "this" *is* not a large green and gray "this." There is of course a practical sense in which we may call them different "aspects" of the same "object," the "object" being thus a construct. All of these "this tree" experiences have the same *function* in our experience, and according to

critical realism represent one thing-in-itself in the real world. But these various data are not the same datum, they are very different existences. So when I have that tactile experience of roughness, roundness, and hardness, etc., which I also call "this tree,' I have a datum utterly disparate from the visual "this tree." The two "thises" go together, the one always being a sign of the other; they have, again, the same function, occupy the same point in the conceived objective order; but they are totally different data. They may all be thought to exist, as the natural realist believes they do, permanently and independently of their togetherness with the rest of my experience; but *they would not be the same thing.* It is their function that is identical, not their being. What exists is a vast number of qualitatively different "thises," evanescent according to our theory, permanent according to natural realism; on any theory we only *have* them as evanescent, and must recognize that no two of them are exactly alike.

If we believe, then, that each of these "thises" that we have in experience is a permanent existence, we have a marvelously multiplied world. A thousand, a million different "thises" permanently exist as "this tree"! Disparate as they are, they can not be squeezed down into one simple object, and we have a world reduplicated *ad infinitum.* On our theory the really external objects, *i. e.*, the ejects, are simple existences, and these millions of "thises" exist merely (as we discover them) as transient bits of our human experience. But just as the absolute, if it is to include all the contents of all our minds, must contain a million reduplications of "this tree," so nature, on the theory we are combating, must contain a million trees where we thought there was one. Such a reduplication, the literal carrying-out of the "natural" realist's contention that "this" —this very "this" of experience—exists permanently, is repugnant even to the view of the "natural man," who, if he unwarily agrees with the "natural" realist's first assertion, agrees rather with us when the implications of the two theories are shown. We give him a simple, homogeneous external world; "natural" realism does not.

III

Among the other possible objections to natural realism there is one that may be briefly mentioned here—the time objection. When I look at a star, the critical realist expresses the facts as follows: Within my field of experience (or consciousness) exists this visual element, a-twinkling-point-of-light-out-there. The real star, the star-in-itself, is separated by a long succession of events (pictured by the million-mile-long ether line of the physicist) from this experience-of-a-twinkling-point-out-there. Suppose the star burned out (or

whatever stars-in-themselves do that we call burning out) a thousand years ago; this experience of mine is nevertheless a reality now. But according to natural realism it is the real star which my experience now wraps around and includes, not a something which represents it. That is to say, my experience now includes something which (unless we reject the conclusions of astronomy) does not exist now, has not existed for a thousand years! The qualitative difference between this twinkling-point-of-light and the real star, so vast and complex, should have taught us that the one is but a picture or sign of the other; the gap between their existence in time should be conclusive evidence.

Of course, what is true so strikingly in the case of a star is true less strikingly, but none the less true, in the case of all objects. The "real" object always exists earlier in time than the perceived object, which we hastily assume to be the "real" object, yet which is really but an element in our own experience, and not the object, or eject, which exists in and for itself.

IV

We have been arguing so far about the world of objects, or objective experiences; meeting the natural realist on his own ground, and seeking to show him that we have more of a reduplication than he realizes, and that if this reduplication is a matter not of evanescent existence in human experience but of permanent existence, we get not a simple, homogeneous world, but as many different *worlds* as we have *experiences*. Which is the better explanation of our experience of objects—a million streams of human experience, with a sea of simple things-in-themselves in between (so to speak), or a million worlds?

We may now point out, however, that "natural" realism is at its best when talking of physical objects; the theory was obviously framed to explain them. It proves much more inadequate when we wish to explain the "subjective" elements in experience—wishes, hopes, intentions, dreams, ideas, memories, and the rest. Now these elements of experience are perhaps as numerous and perhaps as important as the objective elements; and until an explanation of their existence is forthcoming, this theory is much less plausible than our critical realism, which offers a consistent explanation of their origin and relation to the objective elements. What sort of existence can a wish or a memory have outside of a conscious experience? Various fantastic theories have been put forward by the natural realists to account for these "inner" experiences; not having any observable place in the spatial world, they are relegated, according to some accounts, to a non-spatial world which simultaneously exists, elements from both worlds joining together to form experience. How this

taking partners occurs remains vague. How, moreover, in a world of objects experience of those objects can come in, where it comes from and goes to, is a mystery. This peculiar relation of togetherness-in-a-field, which is consciousness—how does it come to exist in a world of spatial and temporal relations? We have not space here to describe how critical realism explains these important facts; we shall merely assert that it has an explanation, and remind the "natural" realist that until he has one his theory is far from rounded out to such a dealing with the whole situation as shall command our attention.

According to critical realism, our fragmentary objective experiences are not parts of the really external world, they are pictures in our consciousness, or experience, of fragments of a homogeneous world which is really external to our experience and never comes within it at all. The conclusions of physical science are expressed in terms of our experience, but hold good symbolically of the world of things-in-themselves which forms the real environment of a human conscious experience. This doctrine meets the need, which "natural" realism can not meet, and which idealism does not try to meet, but which all men feel, of believing in a real, simple, homogeneous external world surrounding our narrow fields of experience. Whether the doctrine is true, and what the positive arguments are which support it, would be matter for another paper.

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THE FACULTY DOCTRINE, CORRELATION, AND EDUCATIONAL THEORY. II

V. THE METHODS OF SOLUTION

ALL doctrine which is to have pragmatic value, that is, which is to result in exhortations—the normatives rather than the normals of science—must issue in some definite practise which can be definitely tested. Unfortunately, the ordinary work of schools and colleges is so complex, and so many factors enter in as constituents to the results, that, though each side can claim the highest successes for its own doctrine, there is no evidence which opponents will accept. There is much valuable and interesting work already done by psychologists bearing on the issues previously mentioned; but they have mostly used units of work which educationists declare to be trivial and mechanical and therefore to have no or little bearing on the higher mental processes with which teachers are mainly concerned. It is argued further that to correlate the results of work in school subjects is useless, because no school subject is homogeneous mentally;